



THE TIME HAS COME TO DEFUND THE POLICE.

MESSAGING TO #DEFUNDPOLICE TO REDEFINE PUBLIC SAFETY AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY AND BEYOND

In response to a legacy of police and proxy violence that most recently took the lives of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Tony McDade, people have taken to the streets in protest. This uprising against **excessive, brutal, and militarized** policing has called for decision makers in city, state, and federal government to defund the police after decades of inaction and failed reforms, consent decrees, investigations, and oversight.

In just a few weeks, the organizations and leaders of the [Movement for Black Lives](#) have worked as part of this protest movement to accomplish what many thought was impossible. Now, cities across the country are considering proposals to defund the police.



VALUES & VISION

For much of U.S. history, law enforcement meant implementing laws that were explicitly designed to subjugate Black people and enforce white supremacy. That's why Black people, along with hundreds of thousands of others, are calling for city, state, and federal governments to abolish policing as we currently understand it. We must divest

from excessive, brutal, and discriminatory policing and invest in a vision of community safety that works for everyone, not just an elite few.

We know the safest communities in America are places that don't center the police. What we're looking for already exists, and we already know it works. We need look no further than neighborhoods where the wealthy, well-connected, and well-off live, or anywhere there is easy access to living wages, healthcare, quality public education, and freedom from police terror.

We can't stand by while our city, state, and federal governments continue to fund an excessive, brutal, and discriminatory system of policing. We will no longer be told that what we deserve is not politically viable or logistically possible. We will no longer be deprived of what others have long enjoyed in this country: **basic rights, safety, and freedom.**

When we talk about defunding the police, we're talking about making a major pivot in national priorities. We need to see a shift from massive spending on police that don't keep us safe to a massive investment in a shared vision of community safety that actually works. We know this won't happen overnight. We're tired of quick fixes and piecemeal reforms. Ending police violence will require a thoughtful, deliberate, and participatory approach that has already begun.

The exploding COVID-19 pandemic and disparate impacts on our Black community have shown us what happens when the government underfunds public health while overfunding police and military budgets. It's clear that millions of people now know what Black communities have long understood: We must reverse centuries of disinvestment in Black communities to invest in a future where we can all be connected, represented, and free.

Local spokespeople need to be able to connect with audiences in their hometowns and cities; center shared values; clearly explain what it means to defund the police in the place where they live; and inspire people to imagine what alternatives to violent policing look like.

Audience(s)	Message Shorthand
Federal policymakers (Biden, CBC)	<p><i>More policing does not automatically lead to less violent crime, but it does lead to a greater threat of police violence.</i></p> <p><i>Federal legislation must a) reject any proposed expansion of police budgets and refuse to spend one more cent on excessive, brutal, and discriminatory policing; b) reject piecemeal reform efforts that have proven ineffective and insufficient; and c) understand that it's not enough to reduce the scope and size of policing—legislation should increase spending on education, housing, and health and human services that meet widely and deeply felt community needs.</i></p>
City and state policymakers	<p><i>Right now, cities across the country are rethinking municipal budgets and reevaluating whether the police are doing jobs they were never intended to do.</i></p> <p><i>We have a unique opportunity to cut the spending of police forces that consume ever larger shares of city budgets, producing billions in savings that can be reinvested in a shared vision of community safety, infrastructure, and recovery that does not rely on the police.</i></p>
Grassroots organizers (local, state, and national)	<p><i>We will no longer be told that what we deserve is not possible. We reject the funding of practices, policies, or personnel that create danger for Black people and deprive our communities of what the privileged have long enjoyed in this country: basic rights, safety, and freedom.</i></p> <p><i>Through participatory governance and budgeting processes that engage and invest in underserved communities, we can</i></p>

	<i>work together to design a future that does not rely on police and punishment.</i>
Black folks across age groups	<p><i>For much of U.S. history, law enforcement meant implementing laws that were explicitly designed to subjugate Black people—that’s why we, along with hundreds of thousands of others are pushing toward a vision of safety that works for everyone, not just an elite few.</i></p> <p><i>Your energy and commitment are the engine that will pivot this nation from the endemic and racist violence of American policing toward a vision of community safety, infrastructure, and recovery.</i></p>
Newly woke whites	<i>We know the safest communities in America are places that don’t center the police. We need look no further than neighborhoods where the wealthy, well-connected, and well-off live, or anywhere there is easy access to living wages, healthcare, quality public education, and freedom from police terror.</i>

Overarching Messaging Guidance:

- **Explain what defunding the police means in the place where you live:** Defunding and divesting from the police is a strategy that looks different in every city and requires participatory engagement from the community, as well as a long-term approach to systemic change.
 - We need to start by making the premise clear: Police do not keep us safe. By talking about defunding the police, we are talking about building a future where safety actually exists.
 - A lot of people are talking about defunding the police—but they’re not all talking about the same thing. Be clear about why, how, and **what divestment looks like in your home**.
- **Give examples:** Since we have only ever known a country with the existing policing infrastructure, it is hard to imagine anything else. We have to paint a picture for people of what alternatives to violent policing look like. We are building the world we need, and

this is our opportunity—our moral imperative—to stimulate people’s imaginations and help them **envision what they may not yet be able to see.**

Goals: Using media as a tool, encourage and consolidate local support for defunding police departments and articulate a clear, values-based vision for what that future could look like. This will create public pressure for local decision makers to commit to defunding the police and taking specific, measurable, concrete actions.

Media Platform(s)	Audience(s)	Target(s)
Local TV affiliates, radio, NPR, editorial boards	Local TV audiences, radio listeners, daily readers	City council members, state-level decision makers



- **The police do not keep us safe:**
 - Police don’t really solve or prevent most of what is classified as criminal activity. Instead, they often escalate situations and operate primarily to threaten, surveil, and warehouse poor people and Black and brown communities, and to preserve the status quo. The very people who most need safety often feel that they cannot call the police because they know this would only make the situation worse—or threaten their lives.
 - Spending more money on more policing does not automatically lead to less violent crime, but it does lead to a greater threat of police violence, especially toward Black folks.
 - Piecemeal police reform efforts have proven ineffective and insufficient. They don’t work well enough or fast enough. You cannot root out violent policing with narrow reforms designed to create change over time when our policing system itself is born out of white supremacy and decades of bad ideas gone unchecked.
 - Right now, cities across the country are rethinking municipal budgets and reevaluating whether the police are doing jobs that could be done better and more safely by other people.

- In Austin, Texas, 911 calls are answered by operators who direct callers to police, fire departments, or mental-health services based on their needs.
- Other cities like Eugene, Oregon, deploy crisis teams.
- **When we talk about defunding the police, we are talking about:**
 - Shifting massive spending on police that do not keep us safe and reinvesting it in a shared vision of community safety that actually works.
 - This will not happen overnight. It will happen through a thoughtful, deliberate, and participatory process.
 - That means spending on health and human services that meet our needs and the needs of our communities. Relative to other countries, the United States only spends a tiny amount of money on the human services that keep communities safe, and a huge amount of money on policing.
 - Ensuring that public safety remains the responsibility of elected officials and communities—defunding police departments does NOT mean private or contract policing.
 - Investing directly in our communities: This means well-funded schools, good living-wage jobs, affordable housing, and health and human resources.
 - The safest communities in America are places that don't center the police. You can find examples in every single state. Look at places where the wealthy, well-connected, and well-off live: any place where there is easy access to wages, healthcare, quality public education, and freedom from police terror.



Q. How do we defund the police?

A. Defunding the police is possible: Reject any proposed expansion of police budgets and don't allow one more cent to fund excessive, brutal, and discriminatory policing. Almost every city in the country is currently rethinking their municipal budget because of COVID-19. We have a unique opportunity to cut the spending of police forces that consume ever larger shares of city budgets, producing billions in savings that can be

reinvested in a shared vision of community safety, infrastructure, and recovery that does not rely on the police.

Reducing those budgets can happen through:

- Withdrawing police departments from state and federal grant programs that provide surveillance tech, military gear, weapons, training, and automated decision-making tools
- Denying benefits/pay to police officers under investigation for using excessive force
- Requiring police officers (not cities) to pay for misconduct lawsuits and use-of-force settlements
- Removing police from schools and universities
- Establishing non-police alternatives to 911 calls involving people with mental-health needs or other forms of health crisis
- Repealing laws that hide/enable/excuse police violence and misconduct

Q. If we defund the police, what's an example of an alternative?

A. One example is a mental-health crisis: All of us may have friends and family impacted by mental-health issues, and because of that, we understand that care is complicated. If you have a friend or family member going through an episode, would you want the police to respond, knowing that the police might end up killing that friend or family member in the process? Or would you want someone who understands mental health; someone who has been there; someone who is trained to address the situation safely? In Austin, Texas, 911 calls are answered by operators who direct callers to police/fire departments/mental-health services. We should be asking ourselves why we've made police involvement the default when these jobs could be done more safely by other people.

Q. If we defund/disband the police, who's going to keep people safe?

Defunding the police doesn't mean an immediate elimination of all law enforcement, nor does it mean immediately zeroing out police-department budgets. We know that peacekeeping is an essential service. But a transition from over-reliance on excessive, brutal, and discriminatory policing to right-sized, reorganized, and demilitarized safety strategies is the right way to go. We can innovate new approaches to security and accountability that better serve the needs of the people without creating massive gaps in service. We learn from global partners non-militarized ways of preserving safety and enforcing laws.

Q: Don't we need the police to prevent violent crime?

A. More policing doesn't automatically mean less violent crime, and expanded police budgets doesn't mean less violent crime. The United States spends more on policing than it ever has before, but we aren't any safer. Devoting large percentages of our local budgets to police has created an environment for more police violence. In fact, the data shows that reducing the numbers of police officers and the size of police departments could actually reduce crime. Back in 2014, the NYPD staged a halt of aggressive police tactics as part of a protest. But the effect wasn't what they expected: Crime actually went down when cops took a more passive role, in the same way that the protests today escalate to violence when police decide to get violent.

Q. My friend/family member is a police officer; what happens to them if we defund the police? Are you talking about my loved one losing their job?

A. No. We're talking about a deliberate, thoughtful process to understand our community's needs and concerns, so that we can reinvest in a shared vision of community safety. Defunding the police doesn't mean that jobs disappear overnight. This work is urgent right now, but it will also involve the reshaping of public safety over time.

Q. Why do we have to defund/disband police departments entirely? If police departments are the problem, why can't we focus on specific reforms?

A. Specific reforms are insufficient and too narrow in scope to make a meaningful difference; if piecemeal reforms worked, they would have worked by now. Current forms of policing are outdated and dangerous. Our only hope for the system we need is to reinvest in a shared vision of community safety, infrastructure, and recovery that does not rely on the police.